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*The Nature of Blood* de Caryl Phillips

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בעולם הפרנקופוני

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# The Raceless and Restless Novels of Caryl Phillips: *The Nature of Blood* on French Ground

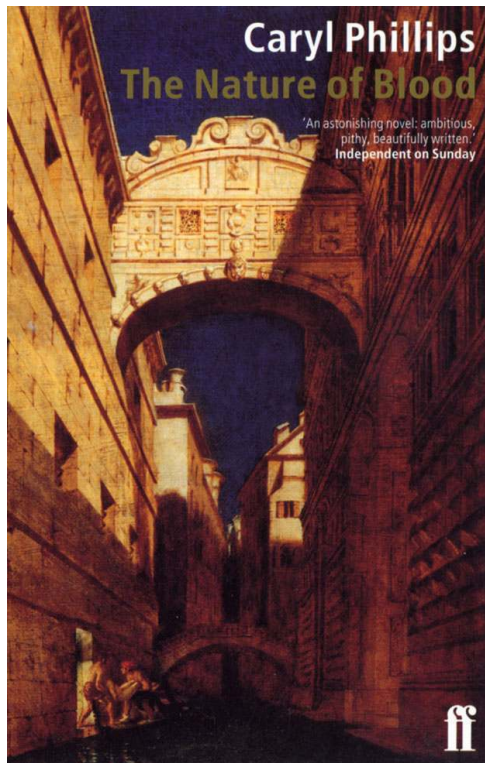
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*The Nature of Blood*, Caryl Phillips

Cover, published in 1997  
© Faber & Faber

- 1 In his blog for *Le Monde*, Pierre Assouline expounded on an idea that came to him while listening to Barack Obama quoting Langston Hughes. Acknowledging the difficulty of translating Hughes' "What Happens to a Dream Deferred" into French, Assouline wished translators would become co-authors. Indeed, many shifts both on semantic, stylistic, subscribe to such a "standard" (status) for postcolonial authors in particular. Indeed, through my analysis of "Caryl Phillips on French Ground", I examine the reasons why a bestselling novel such as *The Nature of Blood* (1997) enjoyed a huge success in the Anglophone world, both in England and in America, each of his book being simultaneously published in London (by Faber and Faber or Secker and Warburg), and in New York (by Knopf). Strangely enough, it was hardly noticed in the Francophone world. In addition, I focus on the repercussions of cover illustrations and the partial "misreadings" they may instigate. Indeed, *La Nature humaine* rings a bell to the Francophone reader: he is inevitably reminded of Antelme's 1946 testimony of his months in the dead camp, entitled *L'Espèce humaine*. But Phillips' novel aims a more ambitious and cross-cultural framework. He puts Blacks and Jews side by side as victims of racism during different centuries and in different locations; he thereby "knots memory" (to coin Michael Rothberg's apt notion of bringing different cultural memories together). Remindful of Fanon's warning in *Black Skin, White Masks* that Jews and Blacks suffer the same mechanisms of exclusion and oppression, the novelist calls for empathy for both groups independent of one's colour, religion, origin or gender and language. Among the Caribbean authors, he is therefore one of the most important voices who addresses the Holocaust and Slavery not obliquely but explicitly, years before French-Guyanese Christiane Taubira was to pass on the Memory Laws (2001) or Andrea Levy and

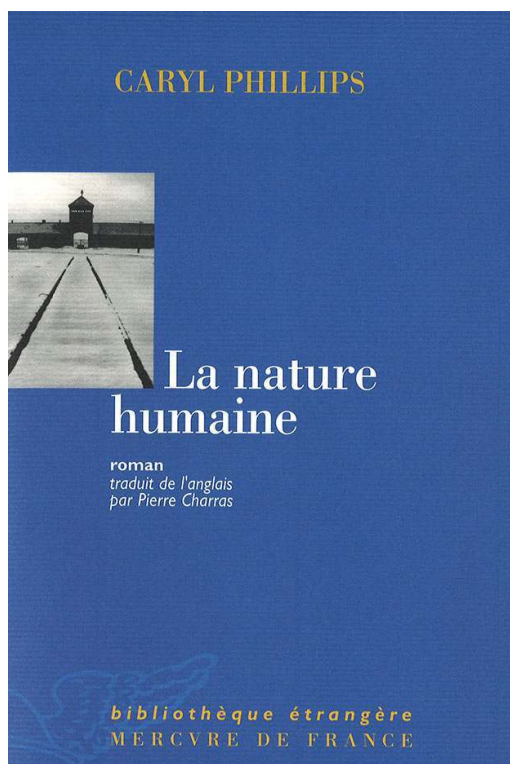
Zadie Smith similarly echo in their respective novels the Jew, next to other migrant minorities, both in the Caribbean and the diaspora (Great Britain, Canada, the United States) as a mirroring figure of displacement and discrimination. In French-Caribbean literature, such an endeavor was only to be seen with André and Simone Schwarz-Bart's novels. Together artists and writers from the Caribbean diaspora, such as Haitian Louis-Philippe Dalembert<sup>1</sup> in his latest novel to date, can work against stereotyping and decline the representation of the "Other", and moreover put the Jew next to the Black victim of Europe's History.

- 2 Finally, focusing on the dense intertextual network which has been so characteristic of the postcolonial literary agenda, I find that the English-speaking sources (e.g. Shakespeare) or world literature classics (e.g. Anne Frank's *Journal*) are privileged over other, less famous works which the author himself might keep hidden. Indeed, Phillips may very well have been inspired by forgotten authors like André Schwarz-Bart (see Gyssels 2011).
- 3 In an article published in the French journal *Diogenes*, the Guadeloupian novelist and critic Maryse Condé praises Phillips' novels for their extension and expansion of the Caribbean imagination and diasporic. The French-speaking Caribbean is overwhelmingly positive about the ways in which the English-speaking author born in St. Kitts (West Indies) indeed manages to stage in a triptych racism against Blacks (through a rewrite of *Othello*), the persecution of Jews in Medieval times in Italy (where the first ghetto was 'founded') and the survival narrative of Eva Stern, whom we recognize easily as the rewrite of Anne Frank's *Journal*.
- 4 While Condé's praise is justified, one wonders why she does not mention two authors who not only have precisely done that from the outset, but who have moreover directly inspired her for one of own novels. Indeed her neighbours who live in Guadeloupe have moreover inspired her clearly for her novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* in which she stages a Jewish husband to the Black witch Tituba (see Gyssels 2001). In other words, there is some bad faith in not recognizing *A Woman Named Solitude* (*La Mulâtresse Solitude*, 1972) and even "en amont" *The Last of the Just* (*Le Dernier des Justes*, 1959) as masterpieces of entangled histories of depravation and dispossession, of marranisme (the conversion of Jews) and marooning (the fugitive slave who escapes the plantation) (See Gyssels 2014). The hypothesis arises: Why to obscure a fellow author such as André Schwarz-Bart who wrote both on and about Shoah as well as on and about issues related to transatlantic slave trade and colonial oppression worldwide?
- 5 In most of his novels, indeed, Phillips interweaves time and space areas, in order to invite the reader to realize convergences in histories of displacement, discrimination and dislocation. In the latter's third novel, for instance, *Higher Ground*, published in 1989, three stories were similarly interwoven. In the first, a young West-African is haunted by the shadow of slavery; in the second, an African-American fights to survive solitary confinement without sacrificing his integrity; in the third, a Polish refugee struggles to ward off the increasing isolation of a life in exile. This refugee, Irina, is haunted by Holocaust memories. While the author never clarifies whether this character is Jewish (likewise Louise Duployé in *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*, the second and co-signed novel by André and Simone Schwarz-Bart, haunted by the same trauma, see Gyssels 2011), she hungers for words but cannot find relief from childhood recollections which seem to be extremely traumatic. While Condé's praise is totally legitimated, one could wonder however why she does not mention other writers, closer to her, such as

Simone Schwarz-Bart. This silencing of French-Caribbean voices raises questions about a deliberate occultation and obliteration of French-Jewish Caribbean voices in the global postcolonial landscape. One could exactly argue that Edouard Glissant and his followers, the créolistes (Chamoiseau and Confiant), while pretending to theorize the creolisation in the Caribbean and more specifically Martinican and Guadeloupean societies, pass over the indeed minor presence of Jews on the Lesser (as well as Great) Antilles. While Jewish migration to the Caribbean is a historical fact, reaching peaks in the aftermath of the colonial conquest (1492, the catholic kings Ferdinand and Isabella forbidding Jews in the Iberian peninsula, and as well as after WWII), authors with a mixed background, such as Michelle Cliff (Jamaica), Ruth Behar (Cuba), André Schwarz-Bart (Metz, Paris, Guadeloupe), but also Caryl Phillips (Sint Kitts, New York) himself who belatedly claimed Jewish ancestry, have apparently decided to have the label “Caribbean” dominate the other identity markers<sup>2</sup>.

- 6 Referring to Condé, we can rejoice in her legitimate praise of Caryl Phillips on the one hand, but problematize her obscuring of the novels by André and Simone Schwarz-Bart, on the other. The same double standard is to be observed for Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant. No doubt Condé as well as Phillips are familiar with earlier novels stemming from Caribbean and “adopted” voices which have precisely lifted the question of the African diaspora on a higher level, that of the universal displacement of people throughout History.
- 7 Nevertheless, *The Nature of Blood* encountered a rather bleak interest and success in a country like France, so loaden with Holocaust literature which since the late 1980’s, has seen a real boom. Can we trace back the relative triumph of a book to the media and the subsidiary factors such as the lush dust jacket of the original and subsequent editions of a cultural product styled and merchandised in global world in which moreover the book suffers from a certain neglect?

## What Cover Illustrations (Also) Do

*La nature humaine*, Caryl Phillips

Couverture de la version publiée en 1999, dans la collection Bibliothèque étrangère  
© Mercure de France, 1999

- 8 In *Packaging Post/Coloniality*, Richard Watts examines the importance of Prefaces and blurb texts, of cover illustrations and dust jackets in the field of postcolonial literature in French. Personally I have always been surprised how in that respect traditions diverge between Francophone and Anglophone literature and the respective translation of novels labelled Francophone or “domaine étranger” (see Gallimard’s collection), rarely “postcolonial” since this is considered in France and Francophone circles a debatable term. To make things even more complex, while huge bookshops classify neatly authors from in and outside the “metropole”, originating or not in the colonies, a sub-category of novels dealing with the Holocaust has not (or very sporadically) been “invented”. There’s a lot to say about the resistance to label books of fiction or semi-fiction as Holocaust literature, on the one hand, and the inflation of books dealing with colonial violence, genocidal practices in Empires, on the other. Yet the author I would like to present here “houses” in more than one “pigeonhole”.
- 9 In this regard, it is interesting to see that the whole industry around the book and its promotion slightly tended to diverge at least before the 21<sup>st</sup> Century between France (the European Continent) and America. Whenever I’m in the States, I regard with pleasure the enormous Barnes & Noble bookshelves and the way in which they and other booksellers display their core business: the book. The object is beautifully displayed and the colourful covers of books with their “commentaries” taken from renown authors, critics, newspapers convince the reader to grasp it. In the French and Francophone world, a book (fiction or essay, poetry or theatre) is more soberly presented to the potential reader; take Gallimard and Seuil, two of France’s most prestigious editing houses, which stuck

to white neutral covers, until very recently they started to colour their covers. On the contrary, a small editing house such as Actes Sud (founded by the Belgian François Nyssen) in the South of France always attached attention to the aesthetics of the paper, print, fond and jacket and has boosted the last year an impressive number of Haitian (Lyonel Trouillot) and American (translated into French, such as Russell Banks and Madison Smartt Bell<sup>3</sup>) in the catalogue.

- 10 We are living in an age where idea and image are closely intertwined, and where interpretation is instantly triggered by the dust jacket of a book, the way it is merchandised and packed in the bookstore, the publicity around it on Internet and other media. Needless to say, our expectations (“horizon d’attente” as Jauss put it) are very often guided by the iconic and the visual. We also know that authors do not always have or even want to have their say in the choice of cover illustrations for their own books. This attitude and consequently surprises can lead to some astonishment: when Caryl Phillips presented *A Distant Shore* in Liège (2004), making fun on the cover illustration that he did not at all appreciate (a young black boy stares from behind a wooden fence). Yet the impact of the cover illustration in general, and especially in the field of postcolonial literatures, cannot be overestimated: it veers between extremes, conveying an exotic flavour to the book, creating certain expectations concerning content of the narrative, or – by contrast – subverting them. In any case, it always guides our reading activity, wilfully or not. A good example in this regard is precisely the aforementioned novel *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* (1987) by Maryse Condé: from a rather loosely drawing of the Salem witch to the beautiful “Portrait d’une négresse” (a painting in the Louvre), to the English translation (done by Richard Philcox, her husband), the different illustrations became at one more artistic and appealing (see Manzor-Coats 1993).
- 11 Most potential readers are tempted by beautiful, colourful, and very often tropicalized pictures on the cover. A whole new generation of books has been published since the late 80ies. Convinced of the impact of the iconic, traditional publishing houses now launch fully illustrated books (sometimes accompanied by an author picture on the dust jacket). Editors are clearly encouraged to do go beyond just mentioning the title and the author’s name, providing an entire visual framework instead. As a comparatist, I wanted to work on the French translation of *The Nature of Blood* and discovered it was difficult to find it in France. I went to the *Librairie de l’Harmattan*, where they were not aware of the novel, and had no clue about a French translation of *The Nature of Blood*. Indeed, it barely received press coverage in France: only a few reviews have been published. I was surprised to discover that this important French bookshop specialized in Caribbean and African-American literature had a single, non-catalogue copy of *La Nature humaine*. On its cover, there was the French title set next to a small picture. This specific imprint partly serves as an explanation, featuring as it does a highly recognizable black-and-white image of the railway track leading to Auschwitz. The cover illustration invites readers and potential buyers to consider it (yet another) Holocaust-novel. Indeed, two out of the three juxtaposed narrative threads deal with the Jewish diaspora: the first one tackles the centuries-old origins of European anti-Semitism through the topic of Judaism in Venice, the second is a rewrite of the most famous testimony to the steady destruction of European Jewry in the thirties, namely Anne Frank’s *Journal*. Lastly, the third revisits *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* (both Shakespearian masterpieces). The latter play, famously depicting a Jew, could be situated around the same time as the Portobuffole



tragedy in the 15th century Venetian Republic. In *The Nature of Blood*, the first-person narrator – whom the intertextually-oriented reader can easily identify when Othello speaks his first words – surprises the modern-day reader by evoking his “language-teacher” (p. 121). “Rude am I in speech”: *The Nature of Blood* clearly confirms the high or dense intertextuality so characteristic of the best postcolonial writing today. Retaining the attention of several postcolonial authors, specifically from the Caribbean, Shakespeare’s Caliban figures keep on making their appearance (*The Tempest*). Disregarding the interlaced narratives and the multifaceted story, so typical of all of Phillips’s novels, like *Higher Ground. A Novel in Three Parts* (1989), the French version (“La nature humaine”) accentuates the post-Shoah section at the expense of the other narratives (each set in a different time and space). Consequently its rare Francophone readership has indeed perceived *La Nature humaine* as ‘just’ another Holocaust novel: for example, Lili Braniste tellingly titled her review for the French magazine *Lire* “Le cauchemar d’Eva Stern” (February 1999). Similarly, in a more thorough review for *Africultures*<sup>4</sup>, Taina Tervonen stressed the link between the three stories, labelling it another novel about “Jewish identity”. These interpretations partly miss the point (as well as the argument Caryl Phillips wants to make), but, tellingly, derive from what the cover image suggests.

- 12 However, a second element makes that connexion: the novel’s French title, *La Nature humaine*<sup>5</sup>, rings a bell to another iconic post-Shoah testimony, namely *L’Espèce humaine*, published by the French resistance fighter Robert Antelme, Marguerite Duras’ partner. While Antelme relates his own months in the concentration camp (like Primo Levi’s and Elie Wiesel) through a highly personal and therefore factual, autobiographical account under the Nazi regime, the Black Atlantic writer (as Alan Rice calls him in an 2012 interview for *Atlantic Studies*) blends in a kind of patchwork Black and Jewish ordeals and stresses the inhumanity suffered by both communities and groups. A dreadful repetition of catastrophes across time and space seems moreover to harm and haunt both groups. In different times and places, humankind has committed massacres, struggled for power, and much worse – in short: it has sadly focused on the extermination of an “enemy”. Gentiles kill Jews, whites kill blacks, and, as Amin Maalouf clearly emphasizes in *Identités meurtrières* (1993), these kinds of collective destructions can surface and occur in every “society”. They can take root in any civilization in any country, given that certain identity politics are taken to extremes, inciting intolerance against everyone who does not fit the definition, be it in terms of religion, ethnicity, geographic origin, nationality, gender or language, among many other markers.
- 13 Extreme, ineffable, unthinkable situations, such as the Shoah genocides, and their “inhumanity” are also evoked in another canonical example, namely the testimonies of camp survivors.
- 14 We should stress once more the displacement instigated by the cover illustration of *The Nature of Blood*, which obliterates the dense cross-cultural and trans-Atlantic texture of its three narratives. The Dutch version, for instance, is firmly in line with the original English cover illustration, featuring a Venetian bridge<sup>6</sup>, which inevitably directs us towards Venice (and indeed the novel is mentioned on websites with telling titles such as “Fiction in Venice”). Needless to say, and as the scope of this article would bring me too far, the Dutch translation of Phillips’ novels, is far from perfect but has not, contrary to the French “réception mitigée” weakened his fame or rename. Apart from some severe reviews, notably on Phillips’ montage technique and the archaic language difficult, if not



untranslatable, *De aard van het bloed* (the reference to 'blood' has been maintained) has nevertheless renewed the interest for the author of *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River* in the Netherlands<sup>7</sup>.

## Mis/reading

- 15 Because of this dissemination of signs, the title and its cover illustration undermine the narrative's broader, post-Shoah and post-Atlantic dimension; the disruptive nature and, most importantly, its "raceless" aim, risk to be completely disregarded and the author's view on the matter gets distorted. Mixing different stories by different narrators (belonging to different nationalities, ethnicities, religious groups and so on) and thereby no longer restraining fiction to the "places of origin"<sup>8</sup>, Caryl Phillips places himself in the lineage of other writers who adopted a similar approach (such as William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice*, of Gary Victor, of John Edgar Wideman<sup>9</sup>, who shares with Phillips many commonalities in terms of scope and shape of the postcolonial novel (BOMB interview from the Fall issue 1994). Language barriers and margins between disciplines also add to the dissimulation of some of the other intertextual patterns between English and French-Caribbean texts as well as by fictions of any of the multilingual archipelago dealing with places of departure for both Blacks and Jews, such as the African shores (Gorée and the slave quarters re/visited by Ellen Ombre, from Suriname, and Caryl Phillips, see Gyssels 2003). These sources are rarely foregrounded in the "knotting" of memories in Phillips' narratives. In that regard, I would like to recall André Schwarz-Bart, who died on September 30<sup>th</sup> 2006. André Schwarz-Bart has been erased in both Caribbean canon-formations and Shoah anthologies, which is a sad obliteration indeed. The author himself reacted to the vitriolic criticism and accusations of plagiarism by giving up on writing. Various misreadings and accusations of playarism of André Schwarz-Bart's novel *The Last of the Just* (1958, translated 1961) ensued, because the author's stroke of genius was to transmute the very act of reading into a spiritual moment of recollection and memory, of "prière d'insérer". To illustrate this, I would like to take a closer look at the very ending of *The Last of the Just* (*Le Dernier des Justes*), a novel which knots memories of both Black and Jewish oppression, slavery, and mass deportation and destruction for the Jews. In this particular passage, the narrator evokes the fact that Jews never had slaves nor armies, and never committed "prosélytism" (it is the zeal to convert non-believers to their faith):

The Jews (who for two thousand years did not bear arms and who never had either missionary empires or colored slaves) had traced in letters of blood on the earth's hard crust – that old love poem unfurled in the gas chamber, enveloped it, vanquished its somber, abysmal snickering: "SHEMA YISRAEL ADONOI ELOHENU ADONOI ET'OTH..." (*Last of the Just*, p. 373<sup>10</sup>).

- 16 The "knot of memory" of the involvement of Jews in the Black Atlantic and even earlier enslavement of Africans is rejected (although historians had proven that Jews have had played a minor role in the Black Atlantic and especially in Surinam, owners of slaves were of Jewish origin). The same articulation or interferences between Black and Jewish Diaspora is also enhanced through the evocation of a place which has resonances in the Black as well as Jewish community. For instance, in *Nature of Blood*, Othello is sent away to the island of Cyprus which knots to the more "modern" timeline or narrative setting of the camp survivor Eva Stern, kept in a transit camp before she will finally try to restart her life in England. Earlier examples of this unsettling and powerful knotting are given in

A *Woman Named Solitude* where the Epilogue conjuncts a historical place like Matouba, a hillside in Guadeloupe where the last maroons resisting the French re-establishment of slavery in 1804, a *non-lieu de mémoire*, are connected to the Warsaw Ghetto (where at the time of the novel's publication, 1972, there was no memorial). For those authors, fiction fills in the need of memory places to heal the wounds and to commemorate the lost ones (see Alan Rice interview with Phillips 2012).

- 17 To come back to the final pages of *The Last of the Just*, the author subtly uses another metaphor of the wandering Jew whom is called in German and in Yiddish popular culture and folklore the "Luftmensch". Yet the definition of the word is dismantled as the narrator obliges the reader to think in terms of *différance* (Derrida). The destruction of six millions of "Ernie Lévy's" (referring to the protagonist's name) literally has changed them into *Luft*. Moreover, the narrator left the words "Luftmensch" and "Luft" in the language of the enemy (echoing Celan for that). Thereby he makes a bold statement of the limits of language, of narration, of fiction even facing the Holocaust:

And so it was for millions, who turned from *Luftmenschen* into *Luft*. I shall not translate. [...] The only pilgrimage, estimable reader, would be to look with sadness at a stormy sky now and then. (*Last of the Just*, p. 374<sup>11</sup>)

- 18 He then concludes the very long saga by expressing the hope that someday, some time, he and the reader will feel a kind of "presence", invisible, yet unmistakably there:

Yes, at times one's heart could break in sorrow. But often too, preferably in the evening, I can't help thinking that Ernie Levy, dead six million times, is still alive somewhere. I don't know where...Yesterday, as I stood in the street trembling in despair, rooted on the spot, a drop of pity fell from above upon my face. But there was no breeze in the air, no cloud in the sky...There was only a presence. (*Last of the Just*, p. 374<sup>12</sup>)

- 19 In this passage, reading becomes an act of Remembrance and the craft of memory changes the book in a "lieu de mémoire". Given the accent on total innocence of the Jews (and comparing them indirectly to other groups of people), the narrator nevertheless touched upon a critical debate: the involvement of the Jews in the slave trade and the participation in the settlement of Caribbean colonies.

- 20 In *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, Langer chastises the author for ending his novel on this "awful" paragraph. In his view, the last lines prove Schwarz-Bart's alleged sentimentalism and bad taste, according to Langer with whom, needless to say, I disagree totally:

The novel should properly have ended here (the cacophony of fact into the antiphony), leaving the imagination of the reader-survivor with the responsibility of struggling toward a point of view; but Schwarz-Bart unaccountably – and unfortunately, I believe, for the aesthetic impact of the novel – felt compelled to add one more brief paragraph, in which he introduces the narrative voice, a projection of his own person, thinking that "Ernie Lévy, dead six million times, is still alive somewhere, I don't know where...", while a drop of pity falls from above and a "presence" seems to add a grain of consolation to his trembling despair. Such sentimentalism must be regarded as a lapse in artistic taste unless we explain it – and such irony would be consistent with the previous tone of the novel – as a last, compassionate tribute to the human imagination's need to invent an echo in a universe that has passed into the chaos of moral silence. (Langer, p. 264) (my italics)

- 21 Exactly the same compassion characterizes the endings of Phillips' novels that deal with the Atlantic slave trade (*Crossing the River*), the deterritorialization of Westerners in the West Indies (*Cambridge*), and the intertwined nature of racism and anti-Semitism (*The*

*Nature of Blood*). This double occupancy, as it were, has repeatedly come under attack. Hilary Mantel, among others, opposes this kind of juxtaposition in her article “My Holocaust is not your Holocaust”. But the main reason why finally Phillips on French ground encounters more resistance than in Anglophone circles is the fraught relation between post-Shoah studies on one hand and post-colonial studies on the other. In a special number of *Yale French Studies*, Michael Rothberg had rightfully argued:

Les lieux de mémoire’s amnesiac relation to French colonial history and to the impact of decolonization and postcolonial migrations is startling - even more so when we consider Nora’s personal engagement during the Algerian War of Independence and his devastating book on French Algerians. [...] recently [...] progressive French critics, [...] thinkers and writers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and, more recently, Maryse Condé and Édouard Glissant [have started to intertwine both ‘memories’]. (Rothberg 2010, pp. 6-7)

- 22 While Schwarz-Bart has motivated his Caribbean Jewishness multiple times to legitimize his “mansuétude” towards other minorities (also Algerians and even the hunchbacks appear in *Last of the Just*, the physically and mentally weak individuals in community, the child and even unborn child, see Gyssels 2009), it is his double take and appropriation of voice (a white male author stealing as it were the voice of a mulatto slave whose “slave narrative” we even don’t possess in the historical record) which remains to many (conservative) critics a bridge too far. The dual enterprise, the solidarity from a Jew to the victims of slavery and colonialism in the West Indies has been misunderstood or barely appreciated in French circles. In one of his rare interviews, he avowed to write both for Jews and blacks in the diaspora (Kanters 1967), drawing on Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber, two rabbinic philosophers of utmost importance, the French speaking Polish author who abandoned traditional belief and custom but practices Judaism as a cultural identity (in line with Derrida, Memmi, and Cixous) is revolted by the idea that one should limit his or her work of creative imagination and historiographic metafiction to his or her own “group”<sup>13</sup>.

## Raceless Novels

- 23 Borrowing a term coined by Meyers, namely “raceless novels”<sup>14</sup>, I would like to visualize (make visible) those writers who take on the same difficult task of unveiling intertwined stories and multiple genealogies. Like Phillips, who has been affected by places like Amsterdam and Venice (see his *European Tribe*), other postcolonial writers (Wilson Harris from Guyana<sup>15</sup>) cross boundaries and issue a global warning against the intolerance and discrimination evoked by theories of purity and faith, origin and diaspora.

- A delicate intertextual interplay is at work here, conscious or unconscious borrowings from different canonized and less well known authors being interwoven in the dense narrative. Morrison and writers like André Schwarz-Bart come to mind in several passages, but this interpretation is of course entirely mine. In the same way African American novelist John Edgar Wideman clearly modelled some of his minor characters on those of the first novel written by André Schwarz-Bart. Indeed, in “Hostages”, Wideman seems to have borrowed at least some of the elements from André Schwarz-Bart’s gift of portrayal, yet he has only vaguely referred to “a French novel” in some interviews. He and other famous writers (García-Marquez, Maryse Condé, Patrick Chamoiseau) have in other words kept hidden the debt they have towards *The Last of the Just* (see Gyssels 2008 and 2014).

- Consider for instance Phillips' daring representation of the extermination of Jews in the gas chambers, which rivals with the transgressive and therefore severely criticized by some of the most important scholars of Holocaust literature (Langer 1975). When he evokes the transformation of bodies into ashes, the very quick and hasty "procedure", he comes close to André Schwarz-Bart's last chapter in the last Book, entitled "Jamais Plus". Here goes the passage from *The Nature of Blood*:

The process of gassing takes place in the following manner. The helpless victims are brought into a reception hall where they are instructed to undress [...] In order to maintain the illusion that they are going to shower, a group of men dressed in white coats issue each person with a small bar of soap and a towel. The victims are then ushered into the gas chamber [...]

After only three minutes, every single inhabitant in the chamber is dead [...]. The chamber is then opened and aired [...]. After five minutes [...] new men appear – prisoners – who cart the bodies [...] to the furnace rooms... They burn rapidly. [...] The ash is white and is easily scattered. (pp. 177-178)

- 24 *The Last of the Just* features the same distant narration, yet ingrained with the unspeakable sadness of the third narrator who loses control of the narration and confess such a narrative is too unbearable. Where Schwarz-Bart masterfully translates the breakdown of the voice, as Sidra De Koven has observed (De Koven 1980, pp. 131-133), Phillips' evocation of the Portobuffole slaughter is narrated by a placidly emotionless persona distancing the witness from the victims:

The condemned were attached by means of a long chain to iron stakes on the scaffolding, and then the torch holders lit their torches and immediately ignited the woodpiles. [...] In the docks in front of the two columns, the gondolas held scores of wealthy people who visited to enjoy the scene from the water<sup>16</sup>. As the blaze consumed flesh and blood, the spectators, on both land and water, were deeply moved by the power of the Christian faith and its official Venetian guardians. (p. 155)

- 25 What happens is twofold: he obviously rewrites Anne Frank's *Journal*, keeping the sister's name (Margot) and making up the family name, focusing on the Jewish "icon" (the yellow star on people's clothes). But the novelist also rethinks the outcome: Anne Frank dies, Eva survives – who is luckiest? This is quite a relevant question, as the "rescapée" is overcome with guilt and desperation, even exhibiting suicidal behavior. Further on, Phillips turns Othello into a predecessor of Louis Armstrong and other African-American jazzmen who sacrificed everything to serve white people and thereby prove the virtue of the black "race". In his monologue, this Shakespearian Othello, seen through the eyes of the postcolonial rewriter, is speaking in "anticipation":

And so you shadow her every move, attend to her every whim, like the black Uncle Tom that you are. Fighting the white man's war for him/Wide-receiver in the Venetian army/The republic's grinning Satchmo hoisting his sword like a trumpet (inversion)/you tuck your black skin away beneath your epauletted uniform, appropriate their words (*Rude am I in speech*), their manners, worry your nappy woollen head with anxiety about learning their ways, yet you conveniently forget your own family, and [...] (p. 181)

- Western historiography and fiction, which "narrates one thing in order to tell something else" (Certeau, quoted by Gurleen Grewal in *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle* 1998), are turned upside-down in those moving stories. The trauma of history and the need to remember the "blanks" in Western historiography have instigated a whole new way of writing, moreover often transculturally and transnational in scope (LaCapra 2000). The singular space occupied by Caryl Phillips' works in the landscape of historiographic

metafiction in the African diaspora is related to his unveiling of silenced male and female characters who have been disappearing in the cracks of History and Historiography. Likewise, *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*, by contrast, have problematized both the presence and the role of white and black characters, male and female, as well as Black and Jew - a redistribution of roles Francophone Caribbean novelists have not undertaken in such depth nor scale, with the notable exception of the Schwarz-Bart<sup>17</sup>.

- 26 All of Phillips' novels concern the marginalization imposed on the Other, the impossibility to escape neither this dehumanizing process nor its origins, the long-lasting influence of slavery and colonization upon the minds of both colonizer and colonized, the ongoing "expectations" (not "high expectations", Peter Carey) and stereotypes produced on both sides, and, again, the inhospitality of those who invade the Other's territory. Those boundary crossings are at the core of each novel and it is Phillips' merit to continually expand these categories of exclusion and inclusion: to show for instance in *The Nature of Blood* that Jews suffered from the same barbarism, totalitarianism (the inescapable presence of the terrifying and oppressive "master") and discrimination as the blacks did in the "Plantation universe" (Glissant) or even had to endure from some high-ranking black officers in the army of the Republic in 15<sup>th</sup> century Venice (as in *Othello*), which in turn bears resemblance to the situation of the "belated" migrants in Britain and France in the last decennia of our present-day history. Though Phillips was not the first to do this (the Jewish and Guadeloupian authors André and Simone Schwarz-Bart, the author of *The Souls of Black Folk*<sup>18</sup>, and many more preceded him), Phillips revitalized the whole conflict of domination based on ethnicity and "strangeness" by juxtaposing different epochs and different places, always in a surprising, original way.

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## NOTES

1. In *Avant que les ombres s'effacent* (Before the Shadows Vanish, Paris, Éd. Sabine Wespieser, 2017), the author of *Rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis* (Monaco, Éd. Du Rocher, 2005) once more intertwines Black and Jewish issues, through the story of a Polish Holocaust survivor who works as a physician in the hospitals of Port-au-Prince, after the earthquake of 2010 destroyed the capital and neighbouring bidonvilles.
2. I will not deal here with this important phenomenon. This can be explained by the fact that Jewish migration to the Caribbean was marginal and that this community chose to be almost invisible in mainstream artistic milieu. Assimilation and "whitening" favored the invisibility of the Jewish minority in the different Greater and Lesser Antilles. A gradual process of obliterating the Jewish presence in Caribbean literature in post-Auschwitz times occurred.
3. I dealt with the works of these authors, especially Madison SMARTT-BELL's Haitian trilogy in *Passes et impasses dans le comparatisme postcolonial caribéen. Cinq traverses*, Paris, Champion, 2010.
4. [http://www.africultures.com/index.asp?menu=revue\\_affiche\\_article&no=977](http://www.africultures.com/index.asp?menu=revue_affiche_article&no=977)
5. This is also the title of an essay by Winnicott DONALD (1990).
6. Particularly for the Dutch audience, *De aard van het bloed* (translated by René Kurpershoek, Bezige Bij) could just as well have been illustrated by a reference to Amsterdam's most famous Jewish museum, Anne Frank's house which Phillips visited during a trip to the Netherlands (*The European Tribe*, 1987). See also Craps 2008.
7. Il Ponte dei sospiri, the Venetian bridge where Casanova was allegedly imprisoned and where travellers often heard his famous sighing. This is the picture of the original edition of the novel, while subsequent reeditions had other pictures evocative of Venice or even Greek classic art. However, as just one "picture" has been selected to illustrate *The Nature of Blood/De aard van het bloed*, it is clear that the narrative's fragmented structure is effectively erased by these cover illustrations, which single out the link to Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* or/and *Othello*.
8. *A Distant Shore* mainly takes place in England and an unspecified African country: set outside the Caribbean, it appears to have less (if anything) to do with the Caribbean or



Caribbeanness - a word still to be invented. Except for a bus driver whom Solomon is believed to recognize as a West Indian, *A Distant Shore* is therefore reviewed in *The Times Literary Review* as dealing principally with “marginal identity”. This rather simplistic statement fails to do justice to the estranging quality of all of Phillips’ novels, which characteristically cover large stretches of history (no less than 250 years in *Crossing the River*) and multiple places of exile and migration. I regret to say that the rather bad Dutch translations of this novel harms the author’s reputation in the Low Countries. As the author himself cannot judge of the slippages and regretful confusing sentences, he has to rely on the material “outside” of the translated versions, and those are absolutely beautiful with *De Bezige Bij* (Amsterdam). Significantly, this and other novels have been reviewed in the Dutch press as proof of the author’s getting a bit above himself (“zich vertillen aan”: “to get above yourself”). For instance, Vincent Gert-Jan judges severely: “Caryl Phillips vertilt zich aan *Othello*”, *Trouw* 13/06/97, <http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/4512/Cultuur/article/detail/2639208/1997/06/13/Caryl-Phillips-vertilt-zich-aan-Othello.dhtml>. (accessed March 14, 2016).

9. Phillips portrays his fellow writer as someone who “knots the memories” (to use Michael Rothberg’s phrase, *YFS* 118-119 (2010): pp. 6-7) through the evocation of an African American jazz player (female) who saved a young Jewish boy in the camps and who will meet much later in Florida: “Some years ago, the French critic, Michel Fabre, wrote, ‘John Edgar Wideman is one of the few novelists who emerged in the Black Power era without sacrificing the demands of art to the persuasions of radical militancy. Possibly as a result of his commitment to his craft, his sizeable fictional production has attracted increasing attention and he is now considered as one of the best American writers of the younger generation’. This observation needs updating. John Wideman is not one of the best American writers of the younger generation, he is one of the best American writers of any generation. His work is not limited by traditional conventions of storytelling. His narrative is, and John will love this word, post-Joycean, his sensibility often Faulknerian. He is a consummate ventriloquist, able to appropriate the voice of a murdered baby with the same facility with which he speaks from the point of view of a child, or an American Jazz singer in a Nazi death camp. The prose is elliptical and dense, but always elegant and, at its best, it hits us with the force of prayer — or perhaps more appropriately — gospel”. (*BOMB*, Fall 1994)

10. « Les Juifs – qui depuis deux mille ans ne portaient pas l’épée et n’eurent jamais ni royaumes de mission ni esclaves de couleur – [traçaient] le vieux poème d’amour en lettres de sang sur la dure écorce terrestre déferla dans la chambre à gaz, l’investit, en domina le sombre ricanement abyssal: “SHEMA YISRAEL ADONOI ELOHENU ADONOI ET’OTH...” » (*Le Dernier des Justes*, p. 345)

11. « Il en fut ainsi de millions, qui passèrent de l’état de *Luftmensch* à celui de *Luft*. Je ne traduirai pas. [...] Le seul pèlerinage serait, estimable lecteur, de regarder parfois un ciel d’orage avec mélancolie. » (*Le Dernier des Justes*, p. 377) (*italics in the original*)

12. « Parfois, il est vrai, le cœur veut crever de chagrin. Mais souvent aussi, le soir de préférence, je ne puis que m’empêcher de penser qu’Ernie Lévy, mort six millions de fois, est encore vivant, quelque part. Je ne sais où... Hier, comme je tremblais de désespoir au milieu de la rue, cloué au sol, une goutte de pitié tomba d’en haut sur mon visage, mais il n’y avait nul souffle dans l’air, aucun nuage dans le ciel... Il n’y avait qu’une présence. » (*Le Dernier des Justes*, p. 377-378)

13. This was precisely the unreliable factor for Schwarz-Bart who, like so many assimilated French Jews, still remained Jew and Polish and Yiddish speaking, etc. André Schwarz-Bart would go further and write together with his Guadeloupian wife, Simone Schwarz-Bart. Together they created upsetting diary-like stories by some Martiniquan old lady who is starving in a Parisian retirement home that bears a conspicuous resemblance to the concentration camps, and which both writers dedicate to Elie WIESEL (*La Nuit*, 1957, published a year earlier than *Le Dernier des Justes*) and Aimé C ÉSAIRE. His *Dernier des Justes*, which won the Goncourt prize in 1959, very much to his own surprise as Seuil has downplayed several previous versions and made him even change his name to fit better the French readership's expectations. Famous "imitators" such as Yambo OUOLOGUEM, *Le Devoir de violence*, the Malinese author having heard from les Editions du Seuil that he could improve his manuscript by reading the 1959 Goncourt prize. Magical realist writers such as GARCIA MARQUEZ also borrowed from this masterpiece (Menton 1999, Gyssels 2014).

14. Adam MEYER, "The Need for Cross-Ethnic Studies: A Manifesto (With Antipasto)", *MELUS* 16.4 (1989-1990): 19-39.

15. In a similar vein, Wilson HARRIS' *Jonestown* echoes *The Nature of Blood* in that the catastrophe of Reverend Jones is repeating ancient genocides in old Indian civilizations, simultaneously recalling Auschwitz, with fire and ashes representing another common metaphor and instrument of total destruction. Martiniquan novelist Edouard GLISSANT links the traumatic experience of the concentration camps to the *Middle Passage* and other human catastrophes in his essays (Gyssels 2013). The result is less convincing, as ambiguity and opacity play hide and seek with the reader who cannot decide on the author's opinion in delicate matters. See his *Faulkner, Mississippi*, or his *Mémoire des esclavages* (1996), and *Poetics of Relation* (1990, English translation 1997), in particular page 20, discussed in Gyssels 2014.

16. Same spectacle in *Last of the Just* (p. 8): "[The Just Mannasseh Levy] was obliged to undergo the Question Extraordinary which was not repeated – that being forbidden by the legislation [...] The court records show him infected by the evil spirit of taciturnity. And therefore on May 7, 1279, before a gallery of some of the most beautiful women in London, he had to suffer the passion of the wafer by means of a Venetian dagger, thrice blessed and thrice plunged into his throat."

17. Kathleen G YSSELS, *Marrane et marronne: la co-écriture réversible d'André et de Simone Schwarz-Bart*, Leyde, Brill, 2014. In the Anglo-Caribbean literature, the Jew has been more recently introduced in fiction by Zadie SMITH and Andrea LEVY. In the posthumous novels published by his wife Simone Schwarz-Bart, such as *L'Etoile du matin* (2009), translated by Julie Rose as *Morning Star*, André Schwarz-Bart deals extensively with the traditional Jewish lives in the Polish shtetl before the Holocaust, as well as with the difficulties of a Holocaust survivor. At the same time, the fictional double of the author regrets the incomprehension met by his fellow Caribbean (read Martinican) authors as he was speaking and writing for their wounded community also. See Kathleen GYSSSELS, "A Posthumous Novel and Two Diasporas", in SWAN. *Southern World Arts New*, (October 16, 2015): <http://southernworldartsnews.blogspot.be/search?q=gyssels>

18. Racial awareness and the "international Jewish Question" became a medium in refiguring the Negro Question at Home for Black intellectuals like W. E. B. DuBois. Susan Gillman states in her *Blood Talk* both communities are jaunted by their nightmares.

The connection between the Holocaust and Black History has been initiated by authors like DuBois (Susan GILLMAN. *Blood Talk. American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003).

## ABSTRACTS

In this article, I examine the mitigated reception of *The Novel of Blood* when it appeared in French translation. Indeed, while *The Nature of Blood* encountered huge success in the anglophone world, Caryl Phillips's sixth novel was translated into French as *La nature humaine*, and has a cover illustration also diverging significantly from the original one. A double shift consequently occurs, with significant repercussions for the reception of the novel. First of all, it reduces the novel being a further fiction on the Holocaust, an interpretation reinforced by the cover illustration which diverges from the original. Phillips has paid attention to merge the story of European antisemitism in another context, racism towards people of colour since the 15th century in Europe, more specifically in Venice, where the first ghetto was established.

Dans cet article, j'examine la réception mitigée, dans le monde francophone, du roman à succès *The Nature of Blood* de l'auteur anglo-caribéen Caryl Phillips. Avec *The Nature of Blood*, l'auteur connaît outre-Manche et dans le monde anglophone un succès fulgurant ; la traduction sous le titre *La nature humaine*, d'une part, l'illustration de couverture, de l'autre, opère un double glissement. Non seulement le roman est tiré unilatéralement vers la littérature des camps, la photo de la porte d'Auschwitz comme illustration de couverture renforce la classification du roman comme un (énigmatique) récit (fictif) sur la Shoah, alors qu'il entretient cette page noire de l'histoire européenne à une autre, celle du racisme à l'égard des Noirs dans l'Europe du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, notamment à Venise, où le premier ghetto vit le jour.

תקציר: המאמר בוחן את התקבלותו הפושרת של הרומן האנגלי עתיר ההצלחה "טבע הדם" מאת הסופר מן האיים הקאריביים קריל פיליפס בעולם הפרנקופוני. הרומן זכה כאמור להצלחה מסחררת בעולם האנגלופוני, ואולם תרגומו הצרפתי תחת הכותרת "טבע האדם" מצד אחד ותמונת העטיפה מן הצד השני גרמו לעיוות מסוים בתפישתו: תמונת שער הכניסה לאשוויץ על עטיפת הספר מחזקת את תפישתו כעוד רומן פיקטיבי על השואה, בעוד שלאמיתו של דבר הוא מקשר פרק אפל זה בהסטוריה האנושית לפרק אחר, לאפליה הגזענית של השחורים בוונציה במאה ה-16, שם הוקם הגטו הראשון.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Diaspora noire et juive, paratexte et réception biaisée, nœud de mémoire, marketing de la littérature postcoloniale, intertextualité et la politique illustrative, lieu de mémoire et nœud de mémoire

גולה יהודית, שחורה; פרה-טקסט; התקבלות עקיפה; שיווק הספרות הפוסטמייליות מפתח:

קולוניאלית; אינטרטקסטואליות ומדיניות עיטורי ספרים; אתר זכרון.

**Keywords:** Black and Jewish Diasporas, paratext and biased reception, knot of memory, packaging postcolonial literature, intertextuality and the (mis)use of translations and illustrations, “lieu de mémoire” and noeud de mémoire (knot of memory)

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